

Weird Tales

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Vulture of Vulture's Rock Was

THE MAN WHO WAS DAMNED

By CHARLTON LAWRENCE EDHOLM

" . . . For instance, there is a proverb that says, 'Dead men tell no tales,' but it were well to consider whether the proverb be not a concise summing up of human ignorance."

Gude: *Science and Superstition.*

THE last sound my dulling eyes heard was the twang of that thin polished steel, which had burned swiftly into my vitals, to be as swiftly withdrawn.

The Master of Geierstein coolly wiped the rapier with his silken scarf, while I writhed at his feet, and as I gasped out my life he stood negligently plucking the blade as one

might finger a guitar; and like the taut string of a guitar it answered *-zing-ng-ng*; and as its vibrations slowly passed into silence, again *zing-ng-ng*—

All this happened in the dark woods on *his* side of the River Neckar, for in following the stag I had incautiously crossed the boundary that divided my estate from that of my family's hereditary foe, the race of Geier von Geierstein; Vulture of Vulture's Rock—and well named.

The encounter took place in a densely shadowed glade, and was, in truth, little less than assassination,

for, as I realized when my rapier met his breast, he wore under his fair, white linen, he wore above his cruel, craven heart, a corselet of tempered links, delicate masterpiece of some Italian armorer, and my blade snapped like glass upon it.

Seeing me disarmed, he thrust me through the body, swiftly but not in passion, and with a gentle laugh stood back to watch me die. At intervals he carelessly twanged the lithe steel, which gave forth a sharp note of exultation, passing away in long musical vibrations, *zing-ng-ng*—

He hated me, with the hatred nursed through many generations, but it was not the hatred of a great-hearted foe, which, defied even in death, *ends* with death. He scorned me: the scorn of his arrogant race, the scorn of a successful rival, the scorn of an ignoble victor. The bitterness of such scorn is far bitterer than death. It taints the soul, even the soul of the dead.

"Vulture of Vulture's Rock, I will avenge myself!" were the last words of mine he heard, and thereafter he laughed softly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps, but I think it highly improbable, my good friend." He was secure; I left no son, and as for my words, he deemed them the impotent ravings of a dying man.

What other words I uttered with my last choking gasps were not meant for him, nor did he hear them for his own soft, ironical laughter and the twanging of his steel.

THREE days elapsed. My body had been found and carried to Schloss Aarberg. The two wounds (one in the breast where the rapier had entered, a smaller one in the back where it had passed out) were washed, and the corpse, shrouded for burial, was laid in the chapel

whose windows overlooked the tower of Geierstein on its cliff across the Neckar.

Seven tapers burned about the bier.

Freiherr Geier von Geierstein lay in his chamber overhanging the river and slept, but not soundly, for a fever that was in his blood. By his side lay his wife, bride of a fortnight, and her placid breathing told of dreamless sleep.

The windows were open, the air had turned sultry and a black vapor obscured the heavens. Not a star, not one serene star shone in the dark void, only a solitary baleful light hung between earth and sky and shot its red rays like a burning arrow into the eyes of the sleeping man. He turned to avoid it, he tossed from side to side, he buried his face in the pillows, but with lids open or closed that sullen-glowing light tortured him like a live coal upon his eyeballs. It was from the chapel window in Castle Aarberg, illumined with the seven tapers that stood about my bier.

A faint yet distinct sound as of a guitar plucked lightly—oh, so lightly!—pierced the silence as the poisoned ray pierced the night. Again it sounded and again, still faint as dream music, a short, clear note, then long, long-drawn vibrations—the shadow of a sound.

Gradually the sound grew, drawing nearer, ever nearer, now recurring at longer, now at shorter intervals, now a low murmur, now a sharp, sudden twang, until to the strained ear of him who listened the sound-waves seemed to proceed from a source within the walls of Castle Geierstein, which they overfilled. The sound-waves deluged the room, deafening the wretched and fevered man until he wondered at the peaceful breathing of her who slept at his side.

He listened, scarcely breathing; he tried to convince himself that it was the blood throbbing in his ears; that it was a meaningless noise, not to be feared. He raised his head from his hot pillow; he would assure himself that this was some natural and commonplace sound; merely that. He opened his eyes. The light from Schloss Aarberg's death chamber smote them. He fell back upon his restless pillow. Fear of he knew not what parched his throat and turned his vitals to stone.

At last (as I had foreseen) the doomed man arose in desperation, not with courage, groped in the dark for his weapon, which he unsheathed, and very quietly turned the handle of his chamber door. The sound rang in his ears; it was not loud yet it seemed to echo down the long, stone corridor, clear, metallic, insistent.

Why *must* he trace that sound to its source? A strong pull at the cord by his bedside would bring servants running to do his will. He could not. He fancied that the clangor of the brazen alarm in the tense silence would be more terrifying than to go on.

He cautiously re-closed the door; quaking he picked his way along the hall, guided by the row of windows which admitted a pale light from the courtyard. As he stole along the chill length of the corridor he heard no sound but his own heart-beats, and as he reached the spiral staircase of the *Burgfried*, the highest tower of Geierstein, he sneered at his own folly in pursuing the fantasm of a restless dream.

He would go back; he would sleep off this fever! As he turned, once more the sound pealed forth, down the winding stairs and upon his head as if it would crush him.

A sudden thought flashed light upon his bewilderment and terror; in the topmost window of the tower his

bride had fitted an æolian harp; he remembered the resonant box with its taut strings that answered to the lightest wind in the tower. A mouse scratching on the wood or gnawing one of the strings had produced the strange noises. A mouse, a timid, foolish creature, frightened at a foot-fall, had struck with terror the heart of the Master of Geierstein! He laughed aloud in his relief and the spiral tunnel caught up his laughter and answered, but with an intonation so diabolical that he abruptly ceased.

He was breathless, too, from the quick ascent, and a little giddy from following the stairs around their central shaft. And so he climbed more slowly, counting the windows, or arrow-slits, as he passed them. Of these narrow apertures there were four to each round of the spiral, looking to the four points of the compass, and always as he passed three of these the light came pale and there was silence, but as he passed the fourth which faced Castle Aarberg, the light was red and the sound fell upon his ears, each time louder and more compelling.

Sometimes he responded with an impatient oath, at the last spiral, though, with a laugh of relief; and as he sprang up the remaining few steps to the circular room under the roof, his eyes, searching for the æolian harp—met mine.

My eyes as he had seen them last, my form as he had known it in life, my rapier as it had vainly searched for his heart; but it was unbroken now, and on the long, gleaming needle the red light from the window ran back and forth like blood transmuted to quicksilver. He recoiled a step. I smiled; the smile with which one spurns a coward.

Uttering a fierce outcry like a maddened animal, he flung himself at me, aiming at my heart the same thrust that had served him so well—once.

I did not guard. His rapier snapped in his hand like glass against my breast.

My own weapon but touched his body; his impetus served me better than my force. The polished steel slid through, appearing like a flash of light behind him.

As he dropped I carefully wiped the blade with a silken scarf on which, as I took pains to show him, were dark brown stains.

While he lay writhing, I twanged but once on the weapon. It gave forth the sound, so like the vibrations of a guitar sharply touched, the sound that had drawn him from the side of his sleeping bride.

He was long a-dying. The first fiery serpent tongue of a midsummer storm darted from the cloud-laden west. He was long a-dying. The tempest burst overhead while I stood watching him.

Before the last spark of intelligence was dimmed, I bent over him and whispered in his ear, that he might hear me distinctly through the roar of the elements: "Geier of Geierstein, think not that death sets you free. There is a bitterness more bitter than death. It is mine to requite you."

IT WAS not until two days and two nights had passed that I allowed his tortured soul to return for a brief respite.

They had found his body in the tower chamber that same night. A burn on his breast, a smaller one on his back, and his shattered rapier on the floor, told a clear story to the physician. The storm that had shaken the mighty castle of Geierstein had felled its lord with a thunderbolt. So it was interpreted by all.

He lay in his bridal chamber two days and two nights, and all the time she whom I loved was bending over the body that she incessantly strove to

recall to life. Then I realized the wealth of love that I had lost and that he had won, and I hated him the more. It was unfairly won, for he was incapable of love. He had wooed, as he had lived, as he had fought, traitorously. Vulture of Vulture's Rock!

He breathed at last, he stirred, he opened his eyes, and the horror of their gaze was unutterable. He raved, he blasphemed, he sought in vain for words to tell them of the terrors his soul had undergone in those two days when I lashed and rode it through the Universe of Death.

They could not understand nor believe. When in his terror he entreated piteously for help from the implacable foe who sat so sternly waiting at his bedside, they called it delirium; when, finally, I again snatched his wretched soul to myself they called it death.

Only once more did his spirit return to his body; in the tomb. But a few years ago workmen unsealing his vault (with its boastful epitaph) found the leaden casket burst and open *almost* wide enough for the quick-interred to escape. By the posture of the skeleton one could see that his struggles must have been super-human.

The memorial tablet that covers my own poor bones tells in sonorous Latin that I was a good churchman, a very soldier of the faith. No tombstone flattery, that. It is true. In life my soul was my very dearest treasure (next to my sacred honor) and I ardently prayed for its salvation. Still I think you will agree with me that I was given a good price when with my last gasp I bartered my soul, my only remaining possession, to the Evil One for—well, let us say for satisfaction.

It was one summer evening, a hundred and fifty-odd years ago, in the woods by Geierstein.